

## Orange Peppers

It's February.  
You want to know why  
Valentine's Day is my favorite holiday.  
It's because you always made it special when I was a kid,  
always a Snoopy candy box,  
always a gesture.  
This year I get you a Snoopy card  
and you get me the ugliest dyed flowers I've ever seen.  
They are exactly you  
and I want them to live forever.

Your brothers are sick,  
the one you are closest with  
very sick — I won't say dying  
not to you  
and not on this page.  
Six brothers,  
three with cancer  
same as their father,  
the other three  
just waiting for it  
because the doctors say it's  
inevitable.

Labor is how you show love,  
you can't save him  
so you shovel  
fill the tank  
feed his pets  
check his meds  
come home  
and cry.  
Labor is also how I show love  
and I also know  
I can't save you.  
I pretend I don't see the tears  
because you don't want me to.  
Just like when mom left,  
just like when your best friend died,  
I cook,  
clean,  
bring you movies I hope will make you laugh,  
brew the coffee,  
tell you about miracles,  
and the power of positive thinking,  
ask about your day,  
ask if there's any news,  
listen.

You go to your brother's after work.  
I don't know how to blanch a pepper

but I assume based on this  
poorly written recipe  
you boil,  
then drain,  
then spray with cold water.  
All orange peppers.  
Orange peppers are your favorite,  
you eat them like apples.

Out of the blue  
I keep thinking  
about you dying.  
I look at things  
that remind me of you  
like orange peppers  
and Snoopy candy boxes  
and I feel desperation.  
It is admiration and fear  
and that is nothing new,  
what's new is  
the clock sped up in my mind,  
the worry.  
Panicked in a way  
I have never been  
that you are up next for cancer,  
for death  
and soon.  
Worried that instead of writing  
a poem about your brothers,  
I will be  
exactly where I am now  
writing that poem about you.  
I don't think I believe in premonitions—  
and I always spell it wrong,  
always spell it like *notions*,  
it is a notion  
but the English language never made any sense —  
but even if I did believe  
I would have to more strongly believe  
this is not one.  
This cannot be one.  
You can't go  
before your ship comes in,  
you just can't.  
I know life is cruel and unfair—  
it has been especially cruel  
and unfair to you—  
but there is a you  
that is rich with joy  
in the future.

I blanch the peppers  
and stuff them.

I think one day  
far away from now  
I will get a tattoo  
of Snoopy eating an orange pepper  
watching a hummingbird  
and you will be alive to see it,  
you will be alive to tell me  
how much you hate tattoos  
and love me.  
You will be alive to tell me  
your ship came in  
and you caught it.

### **Cracking the Egg**

My friend's son swings his legs over mine,  
hands me a dinosaur, laughs.

Without thought

I touch four fingers to my thumb  
and drop them to the little boy's knee,  
slowly running my fingers down the sides,  
palm flattening  
over and over.

My mother used to do this.

She called it cracking the egg  
and it felt like love.

I haven't seen my mother in three years  
but cracking the egg  
and the thought of myself  
always clinging to tiny orbs in the dark  
makes me cry all the way home  
for the first time in a long time.

I think about her face,

her hair,

her slurred voice,

her smile,

her apartment,

her old dresser,

her handwriting.

I let myself remember things

I've spent years trying to forget.

As a kid I thought teachers were just teachers—

they couldn't be regular people,

they didn't cry

or lash out

or fuck things up

because they're teachers.

I guess I thought

becoming a parent was similar.

And for my dad,

it was.

He gave up everything

to have me,

his whole identity

became husband

and father—

there was nothing else.

But for my mom,

her mental illness

and her skeletons

were just too much

to pack up and ship off.

She hurt me

more than anyone ever could

and it's taken me three years  
to think she is just a person.  
She is just a person  
and she is going to hurt me  
and maybe that is ok.

## Day 1: Portage Inn

I order coffee at a bar in Ohio  
at 9:30 at night.

Bartender says *you must be traveling*  
and puts down a mug that reads

*Fresh Start laundry detergent.*

I tell her I'm going to Utah.

She says *I think you're going to the wrong way.*

I say *it's too soon to tell.*

I get to Chicago

and find an envelope of money

my father snuck into my bag.

I message him to say it is too much

and I will repay him.

It's 3 a.m. back home,

I don't expect him to be awake

but he replies,

*says love has no limits.*

In the morning

I look around the hotel lobby for a place to sit.

There are no open tables

but a man speaking Spanish motions me to sit with him.

I say *gracias* and *mi Español is no bueno.*

He says *no English.*

We laugh and eat hard boiled eggs,

smiling at each other and nodding.